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The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

Robert Todd Lincoln

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

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Assassin Would Have Failed Had Son Been at Theater with Abraham Lincoln

Robert Lincoln, for First Time, Tells How He Remained Home from Ford's Theatre the Night the President Was Shot; Had He Been There, Booth Could Not Have Gained Access.

By HERBERT COREY.

WASHINGTON, D. C., Dec. 10.—The boy Robert was tired that night. He had just returned from thirty days in the mud and agony of the front. During those thirty days he had not had his clothes off. He had hardly had a square meal. He had not had a bath or smoke or a chance to rest.

"We want you to go to the theatre with us, son," said his father. "I'm too tired," said the boy Robert. "I'll just finish this cigar and then I'll go up to bed."

And so Abraham Lincoln was murdered.

1821

ROBERT LINCOLN'S STORY.

One of the lifelong friends of Robert Lincoln told the story the other day. So far as I know it has never been published. No one may say with certainty what might have happened on that fatal night, of course, but it is Robert Lincoln's sad conviction that if he had accompanied his father to the theatre John Wilkes Booth would never have gained access to the box in which the president sat. In that case he could not have assassinated Mr. Lincoln. In that case the whole course of history might have been changed. An interesting but rather

futile field of speculation is offered.

After an active and colorful career Robert Lincoln has returned and is now a resident of Georgetown, one of the suburbs of Washington. His health is none too good now. It is only rarely that he leaves his home and comes into Washington to chat with old friends at his club, or perhaps call upon one of the statesmen of the day. Now and then, but not often, he recounts his recollections of the closing days of the civil war and of his memories as a boy in the White House.

RETURNED HOME EXHAUSTED.

On the day of the assassination he had returned from a visit to the front. Of what he saw and heard during that thirty-day tour he rarely speaks. But he returned at the point of physical exhaustion. In fifty years war has not changed in its demand upon the energies of the man. Mud was as deep in 1865 as it was in 1918 and food was as hard to come by and rest was as broken. His first thought upon reaching the White House that evening was to greet his father and then to get cleaned up. Then dinner came. It was the first warm,

well served, really tempting meal he had had recently. For thirty days he had been wolfing down food when it came and as it came. After dinner he lighted his first cigar for days. His memory is vivid.

"I was sitting in my chair cocked back against the wall," he told a friend the other day.

President Lincoln came in to him. One can imagine the picture. The tired boy half reclining against the wall, smoking, and the tired man leaning over him. Almost the tones of the president's voice come to one—tired, but instinct with love and tenderness. He made use of a phrase that has clung to his son's memory.

"Son," said he, "we want for you to come with us to the theatre to-night."

Robert explained that he was too tired. Even then he was so sleepy he could hardly keep his eyes open. He wanted but to finish his cigar and then go upstairs to bed. He looked forward to a night's rest between clean sheets with an eagerness that was almost pitiful. The president nodded in assent.

"All right, son," he said, "run along to bed."

Robert explains that the boxes in the old Ford theatre were both short and shallow. There were but four seats placed in them ordinarily, and the president had three companions. If Robert had accompanied them another chair must have been moved in for him, and as the youngest member of the party he must have sat in the rear.

"My seat must have been placed in the door alcove," he said, "which was covered with a curtain."

Tired, as he was, it is very certain that he would have leaned his chair back against the door to get the greatest rest possible. When the assassin opened the door, to peep in at his projected victim, Robert must have risen. He would have seen the pistol in Booth's hand and grappled with him. Even if he did not, it is his conviction that if Booth had found the door blocked by this lusty youngster it is unlikely that he would have carried his project further.

HIS RECOLLECTION VIVID.

"He would have encountered a psychological obstacle," he said. "To open the door and fire at an unsuspecting man is one thing, but to fire after he had found his way blocked is another. I do not believe that he would have attempted it if I had been there."

The theory is an interesting one, at least. Robert Lincoln's recollection of the remainder of the night is vivid. He had been long asleep when he heard the noise of a carriage being galloped up the drive to the White House. In his half-conscious state his first thought was that important news had been brought to the president. Then two men rushed up stairs and into his room.

"Your father has been shot," they said.

The rest of the story the world knows.

